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Exploring Why Some Students Don't Use Coaching Services

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Abstract

This case study explores why students enrolled in math and/or English remediation did not utilize success coaching at a rural Midwestern community college. A survey administered across three years ($n = 67$) combined quantitative awareness measures with qualitative, open-ended responses analyzed through thematic analysis. Although student awareness of the service was high (93%), usage remained low (33%). Three main themes emerged: students felt they did not need additional support, lacked time due to competing responsibilities, or experienced anxiety about seeking help.

Keywords: math, English, community colleges, academic coaching

Exploring Why Some Students Don't Use Coaching Services

Purpose

Because success coaching in higher education is new and amorphous (Blankenship, 2017; Hall et al., 2021; Robinson, 2015; Valentine & Price, 2023), more research, planning, and collaboration are needed to stabilize best practices and confirm the environments and timeframe for its peak effectiveness (2015). An essential element of such an endeavor includes the attitudes and feelings of those students for whom coaching is meant to benefit (Mogashana

& Basitere, 2021). Within this larger body of research, it is incumbent upon institutions to include students as stakeholders (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). Too often, students are overlooked in program assessment or dismissed altogether, which is illogical considering that we hold them responsible for so much and then fail to seek their input. This investigation illuminates students' perceived limitations in seeking help from the success coach at a rural community college in the Midwest. It is a self-initiated review of a new program established in the Spring of 2022 that is funded by a Title III grant from the federal government. The coaching program was conceived to support a larger effort by the college to buttress retention and completion. One coach was hired to pilot the program and develop it from scratch. The focus has been to build trust among students identified as at-risk so they will seek help from someone qualified to support them. This is particularly important when these students receive early alerts from faculty who have concerns about their performance in class. To increase visibility and access, the success coach is housed in the school's library, which is a central hub of activity for many students.

The question this review sought to answer was: Why are fewer than the anticipated number of students utilizing the success coaching service? A survey was authored and administered by the success coach to determine the knowledge students have about coaching services on campus and solicit feedback about what might keep them from using the service. By understanding the students' experience and perceptions, the school, grant, and program will be better prepared to serve them and fulfill its mission. The survey was originally conducted in the Spring of 2023 and then repeated in the Spring of 2024 and once more in the Fall of 2025. While the results of the survey were positive in many areas, it also identified hindrances external to the school's control. Moving forward, it will

be necessary to examine how bridges might be built to address the needs of students who identified factors that are keeping them from getting coaching from which they might benefit.

Perspectives

Conceptual Framework

Chief among the critical concepts to this evaluation is Student Voice (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). To explain why students use or don't use a service, quantitative measures are wholly insufficient. Seeking students' attitudes and perceptions, then, is critical if scholars and leaders want to understand how students perceive their situations and the resources available to them. Consequently, it seems responsible and humane to seek out the perspectives of stakeholders for whom the services are intended to help, so they might be evaluated fully. Too often, decisions are made for the benefit of people being served without their input, and this exploration is a step in the direction of correcting this error.

In addition to Student Voice, the broader concept of literacy is also important to this investigation. A significant factor in the expectations of higher education literacy is that students know and understand the academic culture of college. James Paul Gee (2015) speaks of a capital D Discourse that encompasses more than just language, but also the cultural artifacts and specific history that one can and should be familiar with when claiming to be literate in a particular setting. Academia has a Discourse, as Gee would describe it. It is more than a way of speaking, but also, among other things, incoming students appear to be slow in recognizing that learning is now self-motivated and self-regulated through the assistance of experts in a field. This course of education is not requisite in a sense of state regulation as is K-12 education of minors. Therefore, students are not held accountable in the same way, and the self-

regulation or discipline that is expected may never have been taught or demonstrated for them.

Relevant Literature

For the most part, success coaching in higher education is seen as a solution to the problem of students struggling or failing to matriculate, especially students who are placed in remedial courses. As such, its effectiveness is measured almost exclusively through success rates in the courses the intervention is meant to impact (Allen & Lester Jr, 2012; Blankenship, 2017; Hall et al., 2021; Robinson, 2015). Few studies have been done from a qualitative lens (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021; Spellman, 2025), and none could be found to address the research question posed by this study. This study also asks several qualifying questions meant to gauge students' awareness of the coaching services, which have been calculated and will be expressed as distributions of the population.

Methods

Methodology

This project seeks to describe the feelings and attitudes students have about seeking help from a success coach, and as such follows the pattern of a case study. The research is done at a single community college in the rural Midwest, which is bound by large and mid-sized farms and a large national forest, making the area very sparsely populated. Coal mining had been a large part of the economy for decades, but it is now on the decline, thus contributing to rising poverty rates in the area. The school's service area has a population of less than 40,000 residents in its 2370 square miles. On-campus enrollment has been less than 1000 since COVID, and there are many online and hybrid courses taken by students who need to work to support themselves and their families.

Method

Data was gathered via survey through the school's Survey Monkey—questions for the survey are included in Appendix A. It was administered in four classes on campus: two remedial math classes and two remedial English classes. The survey was repeated two more times after the initial survey in successive years. These classes and the students in them are the targets of the Title III grant and the coach's work. To encourage completion of the survey, students were asked to complete the survey during a regular class period. A total of 67 students were present on the days of the survey and completed it out of a possible 171 students enrolled in the classes.

Data & Analysis

The qualitative survey data were coded by hand using thematic analysis as described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (Clarke et al., 2015). Several iterations of coding were grouped into themes, which will be discussed in the next section. The survey also gathered demographic data about the students and asked about their familiarity with the success coach. The data gathered for this objective portion of the survey was largely positive, as it indicated most of the students were aware of the success coach and his work, but indicated that the work to market the services of the success coach was not consistently effective, as the numbers fluctuated by year. Table 1 below summarizes the data related to students' familiarity with coaching at the school and their use of it across all three years of its administration.

Table 1
Quantitative Survey Questions

	2023		2024		2025		Overall
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Positive Results
Are you aware that SIC has a success coach to help students improve their schoolwork?	19	0	16	1	27	4	93%
Do you know where the success coach is located on campus?	19	0	11	6	22	9	78%
Do you know what the success coach does to help students?	18	1	12	5	24	7	81%
Have you met with the success coach for help?	9	10	2	15	11	20	33%
Do you know anyone else who has met with the success coach?	12	7	2	15	12	19	39%

Results

Qualitative Data

Three principal themes were drawn from the codes of the survey responses to the keystone question, which asked: If you know about the success coach, but haven't met with him, what is keeping you from reaching out? The number of responses to this question is nearly equal to the number of students who indicated in the previous question that they had not met with the success coach, with only a handful abstaining. The themes and their interpretations reflect the roadblocks that students feel are keeping them from seeking help from the success coach.

Students feel like they don't need to seek support.

This theme was interpreted as these students are thriving with the provided support in their classes and don't need extra support

from the coach. Students responding with, "I really don't need help with any of my classes this semester," "Just haven't needed to reach out, and "I haven't needed services from the success coach so far," indicated that they were aware of the help they could get, but simply didn't feel they needed it. Given the high success rates in the classes, this is more than plausible and is a demonstration that the students are comfortable with their academic progress in the class. Aggregated success rates for both remedial math and remedial English are above 80% for the first time. For the students assigned this theme, the answer to the research question of "Why are fewer than the expected number of students utilizing the success coaching service?" is that they simply don't need it because they are satisfied with their progress and growth.

Students feel like they don't have time to seek support.

The next largest group is the one that indicated various reasons why their schedule or procrastination was the reason for not reaching out. The codes associated with this theme were "Time," "Work," and "Yet." Given the economic situation in the area and that many students need to work to pay tuition as well as living expenses, it is reasonable to expect that students would be spending a lot of time working when they are not in class. However, it is difficult to build a schedule so tight that there are no breaks between classes whatsoever. This is why a procrastination element, or some other stressor, may be at work for more than a few of the responses that were coded "time" and "yet". Among the correlations with other data, it is interesting that approximately one-third of this group is part-time. The perception of time scarcity was equal among both full-time and part-time students. Approximately 40% of students who could meet with the success coach do not do so because they feel they have a deficit of available time to reach out

and make appointments. It is regrettable that at this time there isn't a reliable way to measure the accuracy of their time assessments. It is also worth noting that the success coach's hours are limited by the grant and the fact that it is a department of one.

Students have anxiety or are afraid to seek support.

At least one student in each iteration of the survey indicated that they had feelings of anxiety or trepidation. The code for this theme was "new/shy/anxious", and responses included "I'm not great with meeting new people," "embarrassment to ask for help," and "I'm not very good at knowing when or how to ask for help." While the initial response appears to be deliberately enigmatic, the latter are quite clear. Whether it is misdirection about their anxiety or an understatement about how they are debilitatingly shy, it is clear that there is some form of anxiety about the unfamiliarity that is keeping them from reaching out. So, at least a few of the students at this school have some fear and/or anxiety about reaching out to strangers for help. While this generation of college students seems to have the highest levels of anxiety of any recent generation, it behooves teacher-leaders to find new ways to connect and help these students who are struggling in this way.

Significance

This research uncovers some of the factors students feel are limitations to seeking help, specifically from a success coach. In this economically depressed area of the Midwest, students frequently must work to pay for school and their necessities. The school's primary constituency is largely white and economically disadvantaged. The few students of color appear to be integrated well, so the principal concern for DEIA is to mitigate the effects of poverty and increase achievement in higher education. The hope is

that such achievements will produce greater economic opportunity for the students and their families.

The greatest barrier going forward will be determining how to best overcome the issues uncovered by the survey that are out of the direct influence of school leaders and the success coach. Certainly, options will be discussed to improve access for students who feel they don't have time to come to the success coach and make appointments during regular office hours. Though how to reach students whose anxiety is a barrier to connection is at this moment elusive, it will likely become a priority as further research can clarify the extent to which this is being felt across campus.

It is encouraging that the inquiry started as an investigation into why students were not responding at the levels deemed necessary by the authors of the Title III grant, but has turned out to have a positive reflection of the coaching program in the college so far. This assessment comes from the answers to the question: If you know someone else who has met with the success coach, how did their experience influence you? Answers included responses like, "I was positively influenced by their meeting and results," and "They told me about how much he has helped them understand." At the same time, this research has uncovered clear hurdles to address and bring about even greater change and broader help to more students. It is the understanding of this researcher and the Title III team that this survey added to the evidence that success coaching is perceived positively, but that the challenges facing students will require larger systemic solutions.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Questions

1. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
2. Expected Graduation Date:
3. Gender:
4. Are you aware that SIC has a success coach to help students improve their school work?
5. Do you know where the success coach is located on campus?
6. Do you know what the success coach does to help students?
7. Have you met with the success coach for help?
8. If you know about the success coach, but haven't met with him, what is keeping you from reaching out?
9. Do you know anyone else who has met with the success coach?
10. If you know someone else who has met with the success coach, how did their experience influence you?
11. If you would like to be contacted by the Success Coach, please submit your student ID and the Success Coach will reach out to you. **Submitting your Student ID will cause your survey responses to no longer be anonymous**